DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 763 CS 207 085

AUTHOR Blake, Robert W.
TITLE A New Look at Basic Skills Writing Instruction: A Teacher Workshop for Basic Skills Writing in the Secondary Schools.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Program Content; Secondary Education; Student Attitudes; Teacher Improvement; *Teacher Workshops; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

A basic skills workshop in teaching writing for secondary school teachers held at the State University of New York at Brockport had a focus radically different from the self-defeating skills-drill remediation usually associated with instruction for "basic writing" students. Four assumptions underlay the workshop sessions: (1) all individuals, even "basic" students, can learn how to write more effectively; (2) the "composing process" is the model for writing instruction; (3) writing teachers need an understanding of basic theoretical statements and the results of research on writing instruction; and (4) writing teachers need to write frequently themselves. The focus of the first workshop session was on the foundations of a basic writing program, and covered topics such as the state of writing research, key elements in effective writing, diagnosing writers' skills, and teaching expressive writing. The second session dealt mainly with teaching expository and persuasive writing, and included steps in composing, brainstorming, teaching the persuasive/argumentative essay, and the Rogerian argument. The third session covered sentence combining, writing evaluation and assessment, and guidelines for setting up a basic skills writing program. The key to the problem of writing difficulties is competent teacher-writers who know the writing process first hand and who are specially trained to teach writing. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED219763

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

A New Look at Basic Skills Writing Instruction:

A Teacher Workshop for Basic Skills Writing in the Secondary Schools

Robert W. Blake
Professor of English Education
State University of New York
College at Brockport
Brockport, NY 14420

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Robert W. Blake

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS207085

A New Look at Basic Skills Writing Instruction:

A Teacher Workshop for Basic Skills Writing in the Secondary Schools

We all know what basic students in writing are like. They do poorly on achievement tests, especially in reading and language arts. They have poor grades. They have a poor command of the mechanics of English--grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation. They exhibit what we call a "poor self image"; they don't do well in school, their teachers don't much care for them, and, as a result they don't care much for themselves. Because of this poor self image, they seem to be poorly motivated. They are frequently hostile and withdrawn. They have what the linguists call "language interference," which means in effect that how they learned their native language--whether it was Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, or some other language--now interferes with their acquiring standard oral and written English. Their native language may interfere with classroom English because of social reasons--they are urban or rural poor kids who never heard standard English before they went to school. And they consistently fail writing competency tests.

Skills-Drill Approach to Basic Writing Instruction

We know then what these kids are like who are eligible for the basic skills writing class. Now what do we do with them? The ubiquitous solution is skills-drill remediation. We drill them in grammar--parts of speech, subjects and predicates, kinds of sentences. We drill them in standard English usage--subject-verb agreement, pronoun and antecedent, and verb forms. We drill them in spelling words and vocabulary lists. We drill them in topic sentences, introductions, conclusions, and five-paragraph essays. We drill them in the business letter, report writing, and the elements of a persuasive essay.

We drill them in the skills of writing and wonder why they keep on failing writing competency tests.

What's Wrong with the Skills-Drill Approach?

Why is skills-drill the wrong approach, especially with so-called "basic" students? It's dead wrong for several reasons.

The "skills" I have just noted, although they do belong to writing, are only a part of writing, and we need to be conscious of them only in the final or editing stage of the writing process. They should not be confused with real writing.

We can't teach anyone to master an activity by emphasizing only the low-level skills of that field of action--whether it be basketball, playing a musical instrument, skiing, or that immensely complicated activity of writing. We master a complex activity not by drilling continually in parts of the activity, but by actually performing it. We learn how to play basketball not by only practicing lay-up's but by playing games of basketball. We learn how to play the piano not by only doing five-finger exercises but by playing complete pieces. We learn how to ski not by only practicing wedge turns but by skiing down hills and mountains. And we learn how to write by writing complete compositions for real audiences.

The skills-drill approach, furthermore, conveys the attitude that basic writers are dumb, "retards," "basics"--that something is wrong with them. In reality, there is nothing "wrong" with them; they can learn how to write more effectively with direct instruction in writing.

Skills-drill instruction is deadly dull, as any repetition of low-level skills always is. Skills-drill affects students' motivation, convinces them that writing is a boring, low-level activity, which it is to them, since that's their only experience with writing.

Skills-drill is a self defeating activity. The more they drill in skills, the more they hate writing. The more they hate it, the worse they do. The worse they do, the more they hate it. And so forth, ad nauseaum. The unfortunate fact is that basic writers, under such a regimen of skills-drill, never escape to the world of real writing.

Planning for a Basic Skills Workshop in Writing

With this introduction as a background, I should like to describe a Basic Skills Workshop in Teaching Writing for secondary school teachers which I devised and directed during the fall of 1982 at the State University of New York College at Brockport and which, I believe, had a focus radically different from that traditionally associated with instruction for "basic" writers.

The background of planning for the workshop was this. In the summer of 1981, I was one of ten educators from New York State who were invited by the New York State Education, Resource Allocation Plan Office, to work with State Education Department personnel to plan and develop fifteen hours of inservice training to be offered at various sites throughout the state during the 1981-82 year. As part of the program, I, with the other nine individuals, attended a five-day workshop in Albany in June of 1981, at which time Department personnel first summarized policies, procedures, and programs as they related to basic skills instruction, and then we each developed outlines of the content and a list of the materials we would be using for our sessions.

In August of 1981, I met with the superintendent and assistant superintendent for instruction of the local Board of Cooperative Educational Services to plan further for the workshops. On the basis of that meeting, I created a needs assessment form which was sent out to all the administrators in the BOCES II, Monroe-Orleans Counties district and to the Orleans-Niagara Counties

BOCES district. In response to the needs assessment questionnaire, the school administrators stated that the "target audience should be secondary teachers with the emphasis being upon motivating low functioning students and devising ways by which their instruction and involvement could be more effective." The administrators also believed that a series of three all-day workshops from 9:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. during the middle of the week would be most useful for their teachers. I set up three consecutive Thursdays in October and November as the workshop dates to be held at one of the College dining halls, where we would have a meeting and a private dining room. I arranged to have coffee, tea, doughnuts, and Danish pastries available each morning, with a buffet lunch to be served at noon. After a final planning session with the assistant superintendents for instruction for the two participating BOCES districts, we were ready to begin.

Assumptions Underlying the Workshops

These were the assumptions, the underlying beliefs about basic skills writing instruction, I held to be the foundation for the workshops.

1. All individuals, even "basics," can learn how to write more effectively. It's patently ridiculous and self-defeating to teach writing to "basic " students under the mistaken idea that some students are not able to whole compositions but are fit only to do spelling tests, underline subjects once, write complete sentences, and produce paragraphs with topic sentences. As anybody knows who has taught real writing, everybody, except those psychologically distraught or those physiologically damaged, can learn how to entertain, explain, and persuade in writing. Writing, like speaking, is a human activity which, from instruction and through practice, humans can perform. We must assume that kids not only can learn how to write but want to; if they seem unable to or unwilling to try, we must find out the reasons why.

2. The most powerful assumption for the workshops is this: the composing process is the model for writing instruction. From this generative, life-giving assumption, all sorts of potent conclusions follow. Students practice the writing process in order to become so familiar with it that they lose their dread of writing. Students learn that all stages of writing excepting drafting--prewriting, revising, and editing--are interactive, that is, they not only can rely on others to help them throughout the writing steps but they need the reactions from others if their writing is to be connected to real life. As they follow through the composing process--which, by the way, is the model for all human creativity--they come to experience the ecstasy of creativity with words. This is the most telling reason against the skills-drill approach to writing instruction; no one ever experienced the thrill of creativity with written language from identifying prepositional phrases or subordinate clauses.

3. Writing teachers need an understanding of basic theoretical statements and the results of research on writing instruction. Although the half humorous cry "What do I do on Monday?" has a certain wry urgency to it, we need to know what to do--certainly on Monday--but also on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, long after our "fun" writing lesson from Monday has evaporated into the air. We need to know about the research on composing by Don Murray and Janet Emig. We need to know about the techniques for evaluating writing from people like Lee Odell, Paul Diedrich, Charles Cooper, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Kellogg Hunt. We need to know about the descriptions of kinds of writing by James Moffett and James Britton. We need to know about that original and humanistic approach to argument by Carl Rogers. And we need to know the results of recent research on teaching writing from the National Assessment and from individuals like Sondra Perl, Arthur N. Applebee, and Donald Graves.

Only when we have a knowledge of what such people have discovered about teaching writing do we spare ourselves the inexcusable arrogance of sharing our ignorance with each other and with wasting ours and our students' time with re-inventing the wheel of writing instruction.

4. Writing teachers need to write frequently themselves. As we write, we examine our own composing processes and use feedback from others--students and colleagues--to sharpen and focus our own writing. We analyze how we write so we can pass on this knowledge of the process to our students. As we use the feedback to our writing from others, we realize the importance of feedback for our students. And we need to write frequently so we can sympathize with our students about the problems they're having with their writing. I know you have heard the advice that we should write out the assignments we give to our students. This is all right the first time around, but we should also be working on our own writing--non fiction pieces, poems, even fiction--and we should be sending these finished pieces out for possible publication. Only if we follow such a procedure, do we come to know intimately the whole writing process from idea to publication and can show our students what it actually means to be a writer.

Outline of the Three Workshops

First Workshop

The focus for the first workshop was on the foundations for a writing program for basic students and on teaching expressive writing. The following is an outline of the topics for the day.

Foundations of Teaching Writing and Teaching Expressive Writing

1. Characteristics of the Basic Writer

   (Sources: John Mellon, "Language Competence," The Nature and Measurement of Competency in English. NCTE, 1981.

   Sondra Perl, "A Look at Basic Writers in the Process of Composing," Basic Writing. NCTE, 1981).

2. The Present State of Teaching Writing in the Schools

   (Sources: Results from the Third National Assessment, 1969-79. National Institute of Education.)

   Arthur N. Applebee, Fran Lehr, and Anne Auten, "Learning to Write in the Secondary School: How and Where," English Journal. (September, 1981), 78-82.

3. What Research Can Tell Us about the Teaching of Writing

   (Source: Charles R. Cooper, "What Research Can Tell Us about the Teaching of Writing." Mimeographed, no date).

4. Key Elements of Effective Writing (audience, purpose, writer's role, and structure).

5. Stages in the Composing Process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing).

6. Diagnosing Writer's Skills

   Diagnosing Whole Discourse; Diagnosing Sentence Combining; and Diagnosing English Usage, Sentence Structure, and punctuation.

   Student Writing Analysis Sheet

7. Teaching Expressive Writing

   Writing Activities to Find Out about Yourself

   Writing Autobiography: "My Earliest Memory"

   Early Memory to Full Narrative

   Writing Biography: "Description of a Person"

8. Reviewing Prewriting (Invention) Strategies
9. Brainstorming Expressive Writing Topics
10. Creating Writing Lessons following the Instructional Composing Process (ICP)

Workshop Evaluation

Second Workshop

The second workshop dealt mainly with teaching expository and persuasive writing; the topics for the day were as follow:

Teaching Expository and Persuasive Writing

1. Teaching the Expository Essay

   Prewriting (definition of exposition, analysis of models, brainstorming topics, writing topic and lead)

   Drafting (for a particular audience)

   Revising (opening, focus, main points, ending, details)

   Editing (proofreading for mechanical errors)

2. Reviewing revising strategies
3. Brainstorming expository writing topics
4. Teaching the Persuasive/Argumentative Essay

   Definition of Persuasion

   Types of dishonest methods of persuasion

Elements of persuasive/argumentative essay

Analysis of model

Drafting (for a particular audience)

Revising

Editing

5. The Rogerian Argument

(Source: Carl Rogers, "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation," paper originally presented at Northwestern University's Centennial Conference on Communications, October 11, 1951.)

Third Workshop

My primary concerns in the third workshop were with sentence combining, assessing and evaluating writing, and guidelines for setting up a basic skills writing program; the list of topics for the day is as follows:

Sentence Combining, Assessing and Evaluating Writing, and Setting Up a Basic Skills Writing Program

1. Sentence Combining

Basis in generative-transformational grammar

(Sources: Kellogg W. Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels. NCTE, 1965.

John Mellon. Transformational Sentence-Combining. NCTE, 1969.

Frank O'Hare. Sentence Combining. NCTE, 1971.

Group Activities in Syntactic Structures and Sentence Combining

Tentative Scope and Sequence for Student Activities in Sentence Combining, K-12

2. Revising Strategies
3. Assessing and Evaluating Writing
   Differences between Assessing and Evaluating
   Assessing Writing for Diagnosing, Improving Wri.ing, and Giving a Grade
   Types of Assessment--Analytical and Holistic Scoring
4. Setting Up a Basic Skills Writing Program
   Assumptions about Teaching Writing
   Sequence of Student Writing Activities for Curriculum Mapping
   A Model for Improving Basic Writing Skills

Total Workshop Evaluation

Solving the Problem of Basic Writing

The key to the problem is competent teacher-writers, who know what the writing process is firsthand and who are especially trained to teach writing. How do these competent teacher-writers teach basic students to write?

These teacher-writers have their kids write whole compositions, operating under the assumption that writing is a form of discourse in which one person communicates a complete message to another.

Competent teacher-writers have students write various kinds of discourse, including poetry. As the students experience different kinds of writing, become aware of the full range of writing, fill up their minds with all kinds of writing experiences, they become prepared for any writing task with which they are faced. In effect, it doesn't matter whether they are set the task of writing a business letter, an expository report, or a persuasive essay, they will know how to go about completing the assignment.

Competent teacher-writers guide students through the stages of composing process, teaching them prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing strategies. And they teach students to workshop, to have other people on a regular basis--other students as well as teachers--read the various drafts of their papers and give them feedback. The students come to realize that this feedback is necessary if they intend their writing to be responsive to the reactions of those who read it.

Competent teacher-writers teach skills in perspective. If the whole class is having trouble with commas, then the teacher takes the time to drill on conventional comma usage. But if only one student has trouble with periods, they know there is no need to waste the time of the whole class with drill on the use of the period.

Competent teacher-writers have students reading models of writing similar to the kinds they are practicing. Where the students once thought that all writing--like the printed matter they are used to--sprang perfect from the mind of the creator, they are no longer intimidated by polished, professional writing but now have a different respect for good writing because they consider themselves authors and enjoy a kinship with all writers.

Competent teacher-writers have students periodically publish their best pieces, knowing the students will come to have a pride in writing which is no longer a drill exercise for a teacher but is a polished, original work.

Only when we have such competent teacher-writers, who are convinced of the worthiness of the job, who write frequently themselves, who keep up to date in the recent research in teaching writing, who are aware of the special problems "basic" writers have and of the unique feelings of inadequacy they suffer from, and who know that the eradication of errors in low-level skills is not

the business of writing instruction but that the sharpening of overall writing skills is, will we begin to solve the problem of those students whom we have meanly labelled "basic" writers.